



## Paradoxes in Danish Vocational Education and Training

Louw, Arnt Vestergaard; Katznelson, Noemi

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All vocational education and training schools in Denmark are required to launch retention initiatives and report yearly on their efforts to increase retention and the completion rate of their students. This article argues that the structural conditions and incentive structure around VET produce teaching practices in VET that create unmotivated, weak students and unintentional push-out effects. Furthermore, it is suggested that the marketization of education has had a profound effect on the practice in VET in such a way that good education has come to be more associated with retaining all students in the VET schools and less about developing good teaching practices..

**Keywords:** Vocational Education and Training (VET) · retention · motivation · dropout rate

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Arnt Vestergaard Louw  
Centre for Youth Research  
Department of Learning and  
Philosophy, Aalborg University –  
Copenhagen, A. C. Meyers  
Vænge 15, 2450 København SV  
Mail: avl@learning.aau.dk

Noemi Katznelson  
Centre for Youth Research  
Department of Learning and  
Philosophy, Aalborg University –  
Copenhagen  
Mail: nka@learning.aau.dk

# Paradoxes in Danish Vocational Education and Training

ARNT VESTERGAARD LOUW AND NOEMI KATZNELSON

You think it's about teaching carpentry, but that's actually the least of it.

Carpentry teacher, 2011

## Introduction

In the spring 2012, the Danish Daily newsletter A4 wrote that 63% of all Vocational Education and Training teachers in Denmark think the share of unmotivated students has increased during the last five years and that lack of motivation is the main reason behind the high dropout rates from Vocational Education and Training (VET) (Ugebrevet A4, 16.2.12.). The Danish daily broadsheet newspaper Politiken wrote that 54% think the dropout rate for VET schools will increase further (Politiken, 8.4.2011). However, the picture of VET students as mainly unmotivated and weak seems too indiscriminate and does not tally with the reality reflected in various empirical studies which we have conducted on VET during recent years (Louw 2013, Katznelson et al. 2011). These studies show a much more varied picture in which a great share of the students are committed to their education and would never dream of doing something else. In our research, 65% of the students stated that they chose VET because they found it interesting, and two out of three students did not doubt they had made the right choice

(Katznelson & Brown 2011, p. 23). So why do we find such paradoxes within the various perceptions of VET?

Based on three exemplary cases from two VET studies we have conducted, the argument in this article is that the reason is partly due to the structural conditions and incentive structures that are increasingly focusing on retention rather than educational content and academic goals. According to our qualitative analyses, these structures around VET seem to produce teachers and teaching practices in VET that in turn create unmotivated, weak students and unintentional push-out effects.

Looking at the incentive structures around VET, the issue of students dropping out seems to be dominating, not least because the dropout rate for VET has been about 50% for the last ten years (UNI-C, The Danish IT Centre for Education and Research). The dropout rate is generally higher among VET students than those in general upper secondary education in Denmark as well as Europe (OECD 2012). Research into reasons for dropping out and ways to combat it is high on the European agenda because of the 2020 target of a maximum 10% early school leavers across Europe (EU 2011). Dropping out is thus regarded as a serious problem in EU educational policy.

In Denmark, combating the dropout rate of VET students is considered a benchmark for the VET system (Regeringen [The Government] 2011; Finansministeriet [The Danish Ministry of Finance] 2006). VET schools are obliged to launch retention initiatives and report yearly on their efforts to increase retention and completion rates (BEK [Order] 1514, 15/12/2010). VET schools are thus set to play a vital role in achieving the dominant official educational policy objective that 95% of a cohort in 2015 completes at least an upper secondary education (Regeringen 2011; Cort & Rolls 2010).

This has resonated through the Danish VET research agenda for the past 10–20 years, focusing on the individual students with special attention to weak students (Katznelson 2004; Koudahl 2005; Jensen & Jørgensen 2005; Jensen & Jensen 2005; 2007; Pedersen 2006; Knudsen 2007; Katznelson & Olsen 2008; EVA [The Danish Evaluation Institute] 2008; 2009; Humlum & Jensen 2010; Østergaard & Jensen 2010; Nielsen 2011). This agenda is linked to European policy processes initiated with the adoption of the Lisbon Declaration in 2000 and further accentuated by the Copenhagen Declaration in 2002, both of which stress the importance of education in the transition to a knowledge-based economy in the EU (Cort 2011). Thus, these issues being dealt with in the Danish VET sector transcend national borders and are of relevance to the Nordic countries as well as across the EU.

Dropping out is at a higher rate among VET students than among students in the academic upper secondary education. However, this article moves away from an individual “blaming the students” perspective towards a contextual perspective that seeks to understand the connections between institutional and structural conditions and the daily teaching practices in VET, from the students’ perspective. The research presented stems from our empirical investigations of VET. Three exemplary cases are presented, to illustrate how the overall attention on retention, dropout and completion rates, and the general lack of apprenticeships on the labor market, influence daily teaching practices, and affect teachers’ perception of students and the way students are labeled (Bernstein 2000; Varenne & McDermott 1999); and to illustrate the effect of that labelling on VET students and how the students negotiate their positions (Davies & Harré 1990; Davies 1990). We hereby seek to investigate whether the perception among the teachers that

VET students are unmotivated is closely related to the structural conditions around VET in Denmark and in a broader sense, across Europe. Furthermore, we explore how these conditions affect the classification of the purpose of VET teaching in practice (Bernstein 1977; 2000). However, before turning to the findings, the present study and its methods are briefly introduced followed by an outline of the analytical focus.

## The study and its methods

This article builds upon two different research projects within VET basic training in which we have been involved: Study A and study B:

Study A is a PhD project conducted by Louw (2013). In this project, anthropologically inspired fieldwork was conducted in which Louw enrolled as a carpentry student for five weeks and received teaching together with the regular students (Geertz 1973; Denzin & Lincoln 1994; Hasse 2002; Hasstrup 2003; Madsen 2003). The school is situated in a medium-sized provincial town in Zealand and offers seven different basic courses. The class in question consisted of twenty-five male students. Data in this study consist of Louw's field notes, in-context interviews with students and teachers, and a variety of official school letters, documents and teaching materials. Cases one and two in this article are based on data from study A.

Study B is about youths in upper secondary education in Denmark. It was carried out by Katznelson and a colleague. In this study, twenty youngsters, six of them VET students, were observed for one day four times a year over a period of three years (2012–2015). The VET school in question is situated in a medium-sized provincial town in Jutland and offers six different basic courses. Study B is based on participant observation (Spradley 1980; DeWalt & DeWalt

2011). Data consist of observation notes and in-context interviews with teachers and students. Case three in the article is based on data from Study B.

On the basis of this research, three exemplary cases are constructed to illustrate some of the main findings across the two projects. The case presentation is chosen because it is possible to describe processes, while maintaining complexity and diversity in a clear and illustrative manner. It is well-suited to the production of scientific knowledge of interpersonal relations and the construction of meaning and significance, as it unfolds in concrete and specific teaching settings (Geertz 1973, p. 5). This type of presentation was also chosen in order to reflect the plurality of methods and to assign equal importance to the different types of data. As the cases derive from our own empirical studies, they are written in the first person.

Throughout the article, the students' perspectives are privileged, as we aim to make connections between these perspectives and institutional and structural conditions. This approach has been used in a number of Danish studies that focus on how VET students learn (Tanggaard 2006; 2008; Andersen 2008; Pless & Katznelson 2007; Andersen 2005; Katznelson et al. 2011), what motivates VET students (Katznelson & Brown 2011), what characterizes VET students who have dropped out due to their immigrant background (Jensen & Jørgensen 2005), and the construction of identity and masculinity among VET students (Hansen 2009). Closest to the argument in this article, Grønborg (2011) has investigated VET students' reaction to the implementation of Physical Education (PE) and health as retention initiatives in the VET system.

The three cases presented in the article cover the following themes:

- Labeling VET students: Introduction to VET teachers' conceptions of students

and students' initial experiences with the education and the subject matter.

- Classifying VET – social provision or educational practice: Students' experiencing of one of the school's concrete retention initiatives, PE, as part of basic training and the teachers' handling of this initiative.
- Teacher labeling and student positioning: Teachers' experiences with students in workshop training and the interaction between teachers and students in this context.

These three themes are exemplary, as they constitute crystallizations of the meeting between the individual student and society's demands and expectations of VET at the level of daily teaching practice, and at a societal level; and they highlight some features of general relevance to the current VET practice in Denmark.

## Analytical focus

The analysis of the connection between classroom interactions and general social conditions and structures is inspired by the work of Bernstein (1977; 2000, 2001a & b). The concept of classification (Bernstein 1977; 2000) is deployed in the analysis of education-relevant student-teacher interactions and different discipline conceptions. The concept of strong and weak classifications renders it possible to analyze demarcation between the retention incentive and the discipline of carpentry at a general level, while carrying an analytical potential regarding the students' experiences with a given program and the taught subject matter – be it what they attribute to a given vocational profession or what are marginalized as irrelevant teaching activities. As illustrated in case two, the introduction of PE triggers a classification battle within carpentry and

questions whether PE belongs to the discipline of carpentry. Such relations between external demarcations and internal, local negotiations of subject matter understandings create different learning environments and different possible pedagogical relations between students and teachers. How they unfold in practice depends on individual, local conditions and their interplay with structural terms and conditions.

Educational practice also has to do with the students' identity and the schools' expectations of the students. As the argument goes in this article, the students' identity is connected to structural conditions, the incentive structure around VET and the way the students are met by the teachers and the school as an institution. Bernstein describes this as a process by which teachers attach labels to students which has to do with the teachers' expectations of the various students and the ways in which teacher and student relations are formed (Bernstein 2000, p. 13). The concept of labeling makes it possible to accentuate certain assumptions and expectations, for instance those implicit expectations teachers have of VET students even before they start (see also Varenne & McDermott 1998). Such expectations may be expressed explicitly or be implicit in the written material produced by the school (Ulriksen 2004), as we will see in cases one and two. The actual labeling of the students varies depending on the type of pedagogical setting. To capture the dynamics of teacher-student interaction and focus on students' vocational identity as formations, Davies & Harré's concept of positioning is employed in the analysis (Davies & Harré 1990; Davies 1990). VET Students' sense of who they are and what they can be as students develops, changes and is negotiated in the systems of conceptions and meaning that exist within the given learning environment. Such dynamics become particularly clear in the anal-

yses of the interaction between students and teachers regarding PE as a retention initiative (case two) and in connection with subject-relevant workshop activities (case three).

The three cases are thus analyzed as specific situations and as representations of more general tendencies within VET. Here, issues of retention and the responsibility of VET schools to provide a vocationally well-trained workforce qualified for the global, competitive market (Cort 2010) constitute a double task, which affects how the teachers handle daily teaching (Koudahl 2011). In the following, each case is first presented and analyzed, followed by an overall analysis.

## Labeling the “good” VET student

The students’ first encounter with VET is chosen as the first case, because this is where the school and teachers’ expectations of the students emerge very clearly. The first phase of the vocational education program is a crucial period of transition in which the students form their desire and motivation for acquiring certain profession-relevant competences and skills, while new opportunities to form profession-relevant identities emerge. How this transition period is managed by the school and the teachers affects the students’ motivation for the education in a profound way (Vasalampi et al. 2010; Howe & Val 2011; Pless & Katznelson 2007).

### Case one

Before commencing the VET program, we all received a school letter with a brief welcoming statement and information about the timing and location of the first day’s teaching, including general class hours and holidays. The letter recommends taking out insurance against theft, loss and damages or injury on the school premises. Moreover, students are reminded to bring drawing and

writing implements, work clothing, a padlock and a pair of safety shoes.

08:00 Monday morning. A couple of weeks later on our first day, the teacher welcomes everyone to the school. He explains that everyone should expect the basic training “to last 30 weeks – some may be faster, others slower ... if you complete the course...,” he continues, and says that the first two weeks are about “something we call Assessment of Prior Learning.”

There then follows a tour of the school. It is a large VET school with a number of other programs. We pass the carpenters. “We can’t use their machines,” says the teacher. We pass the cooks, painters, bricklayers and blacksmiths. We follow the teacher in one long row and when we make a stop, most of us stand in the corridor while a few look inside a workshop room, before quickly moving on. “It’s not that interesting,” says the teacher. Everyone is very quiet as we walk. Nobody asks any questions.

The tour ends in a classroom where the teacher asks us to present ourselves our background and past vocation-relevant experiences. After a short break, the teacher distributes a thirteen-point list of school regulations that he explains: four points state that students must attend teaching, be study active, follow the teacher’s instructions and clean up after themselves; three points concern regulations in case of absence, exemption from teaching or illness; another three points are about unacceptable behavior at the school, for instance, the consumption of alcohol or drugs, violence, bullying, harassment or criminal behavior; two points concern behavior in class and state that magazines and newspapers must be put down, cell phones and music players turned off, and that a student can be denied access to an exam if s/he has not met the requirement of compulsory school attendance or accomplished the tasks put forth by the school; one

point states firmly that students are liable to pay for lost material, books or tools. Detailed instructions on how to report sick correctly to avoid being registered as absent without reason are also distributed.

One of the students asks if we can wear black work clothes. The teacher says, “You can wear whatever color you want. Carpenters wear white-collared clothes, but I do not care what color you wear.”

10:20: The introductory day ends.

The following analysis focuses on the education, the teachers’ experiences with the students and the students’ experiences of the education on the first day. Based on the described case, the school seems to view new VET students as people who have to be controlled and kept on a tight rein in order to ensure that they become what is implicitly understood as “a good student,” that is, someone who is not absent, accomplishes his tasks and does not steal, etc. If we take a close look at the type of labeling the students face in the written material they receive on the first day of their education and in the teacher’s remarks, we see that the label “typical VET student” covers someone who may drop out and may not complete the education – “if you complete” as the teacher puts it. Furthermore, the typical student is labeled as someone who may potentially be a criminal, take drugs or consume alcohol at the school, or run into problems with absenteeism. Labeling the students as potentially motivated and committed carpentry students who are excited about learning a noble craft seems rather absent from this introduction to the education. When a student actually does show interest in the craft of carpentry by asking what color clothes he should wear, the teacher dismisses the question as irrelevant: “... I do not care what color you wear.” Taken to the extreme, one might argue that the position as committed and motivated carpentry student is nonexistent, and

it seems it will take much agency and negotiation power on the part of the VET students to adopt and maintain this position.

It is tempting to point the finger of scorn at the school and the teacher. Yet from the perspective of Bernstein, it is much more interesting to ask how this practice became the legitimate and normal way of welcoming new VET students. From the perspective of the school and the teacher, the approach is most likely reasonable, as they have undoubtedly had experiences with students behaving in such a manner, so it is better to prepare for the challenge. “You will see a lot of this when you look around. It is also a way of securing legal ground for expelling students when they misbehave,” a VET school manager responded when presented with this point. Furthermore, this approach and explicit institutional labeling of VET students echoes the media-made picture of VET students. This picture and the dropout rate thus give rise to a potent and seemingly reasonable school policy that focuses explicitly on the weak and potential dropout students, whereby such school administrative practice becomes valid and legitimate – it makes sense from the perspective of the teachers and the school.

From the students’ perspective, the VET school appears to be a place with many rules and clear consequences of breaking those rules. The teachers come across as school representatives and administrators of the rules, which affects the nature of the relationship students can form with them, and thereby also the potential learning opportunities. In the described case, the students have just embarked on a vocational education as carpenters, and many of them are about to learn many new things, which requires a great deal of physical as well as mental energy. It is thus crucial that the students feel a sufficient degree of security and confidence in the learning situations, that they

trust the teachers (Illeris 2006) and that the teachers are able to build good relationships with them (Hattie 2009). The great attention to retention and dropout rates, which has characterized VET for some years and made the abovementioned school procedure legitimate and normal, seems to restrict opportunities for establishing trusting and confident relationships between teachers and students at the vocational school. The practice thus challenges the foundation for establishing a favorable learning environment. If we further assume that many of the students have chosen carpentry as their education because they have the desire to become carpenters, being labeled as a potential dropouts, violent and delinquent students – to bring matters to a head – will at best arouse astonishment and at worst disappointment and resistance towards the school and its teachers and possibly ultimately lead to them dropping out. In any event, setting the tone in this manner seems to be an unproductive beginning of a long learning process. The question is how a positive and professionally proud way of welcoming the students would affect their learning opportunities, motivation and educational commitment.

#### *Classifying VET – social provision or educational practice*

As mentioned, retention plays a central role at VET, and all VET schools have been legally bound to prepare retention plans since 2008. These plans must cover the school's methods, targets and strategies for lowering the dropout rate (BEK [order] 1514, § 7, item 4). Thus retention is deeply embedded in the institutional practice at VET. The following case presents a retention initiative many VET schools have introduced, PE, (Grønborg 2011), the idea behind it and how the teacher-student interaction around PE unfolds during the first weeks of basic training.

#### **Case two**

On the introduction day before basic training, we were told that two hours' PE had been added to the schedule every Tuesday and Thursday morning. The teacher informed us that orienteering had been planned and mountain bikes and protective gear had been bought, as it had been a great success when tested in other classes. We were also told that because of PE, the basic training had been extended by a couple of weeks.

Several students express annoyance with this, and Karsten, a 30-year-old student, explains that for him, a concrete consequence of this is that it will postpone the start of his apprenticeship, when he can begin to receive an apprenticeship salary. He owns his own flat and has a family, and cannot afford to live off the State education grant for very long. For Karsten, it is important to complete the basic training as quickly as possible. Due to the extra weeks of basic training that PE entails, he is now considering skipping the program altogether. Another student asks the teacher whether it is possible to prolong the teaching time by two hours on the days with PE, thereby avoiding extending the duration of the whole program. However, this is not possible as it would require extra resources for teaching staff.

We begin the first session of PE in a classroom. The teacher presents a number of slides and explains that the school has decided to introduce PE as part of the basic training to build stronger social relations, as that can improve retention of VET students.

Almost all of the students showed up on the first day of PE, but in the following weeks, an increasing number of students skip PE and work in the carpentry workshop instead. One Tuesday morning, one of the other carpentry teachers enters the workshop room and is surprised to see students working there instead of attending PE. Yet, he seems uncertain how to interpret the sit-



uation and leaves the room saying: “Well, as long as you’re doing something in the workshop, it can’t be all that bad.”

The analysis of case two primarily deals with the teachers’ view of students and the classifications of the education, including the profession-relevant content. The aim is to disclose how these conceptions and classifications manifest themselves to the students during their experiences with the education and their meetings with the teachers. The student labels produced by the school and the teachers are evident in many situations, but are particularly explicit when the teacher explains the reason for teaching PE, which is introduced as a means to improve social relations and thereby retain the students. Each student is thus explicitly labeled as someone who might drop out if the school does not take extraordinary measures to prevent them from doing so. The teacher “sees” the student from the perspective of a retention discourse, and from this perspective, sudden features of the students are highlighted and others are toned down. This means certain positions are made available from which the students can make themselves recognizable as VET students. And within this perspective, opposition to PE is “seen” as resistance to the school and the education.

However, by shifting perspective and looking at the case from the students’ perspective, a different picture emerges. Now PE is classified as not belonging to the discipline of carpentry, which explains why the students avoid it and decide to work in the workshop instead. The students “see” PE from what we might call an education discourse, and from this perspective, PE is in opposition to the school and the education, and the students consider it as something which should be avoided. With regards to Karsten, PE even has a direct counter-productive effect, as it has made him consider dropping out of basic training. As Grønberg

points out, to present an initiative such as PE as the solution to complex dropping out problems is simply wishful thinking (2001). In line with Grønberg’s point, it is worth noting that initiatives which are introduced to tackle dropping out problems at one point in time may be identified as the very cause of dropping out at another point in time (Jørgensen 2011).

What is also interesting is the emerging classification of disciplines. The retention initiative, in this case PE, is considered to belong to another discipline and not carpentry, so that the teacher’s introduction of PE in basic training thus comes to classify two types of discipline, that is, carpentry and a process aimed at retaining students, which we will call a retention discipline. The two disciplines emerge as strongly classified with a clear-cut demarcation between them.

Yet, the students do not acknowledge the positive social effects ascribed to PE by the teachers. They see PE as entertainment at best, and at worst as a meaningless barrier preventing them from educational progress. In daily practice, the two disciplines thus constitute a potential area of conflict between the teachers and the students because the students have an ambivalent attitude to the retention discipline, which the teachers must relate to in their teaching. The teachers face the challenge of having to give weight to either of the disciplines. How is the teacher to react when a student is absent from compulsory PE but present in the workshop? Should the student be considered absent even though non-attendance at PE may be seen as an expression of motivation and commitment to the discipline of carpentry? Bringing the matter to a head, the question is whether students’ absenteeism in PE can lead to suspension from a vocational education that they are motivated for. Such dilemmas end up at the feet of the teachers in daily pedagogical practice and force them to reg-

ularly develop pragmatic student-differentiated absence-management strategies (Grønberg 2011; Jonasson 2011).

The retention discourse has become part of the standard pedagogical mindset at VET and among the teachers, and initiatives such as PE are consequently not classified as belonging to the vocational discipline but belonging to the retention discipline. As shown in case two, the retention and education discourse, together with the students and teachers' views, form a complex cross pressure that limits the students' access to a legitimate position as a VET student. In other words, the retention discourse exerts symbolic control over the VET students and shapes their positioning possibilities.

Transferring this contest of disciplines in the classroom to the level of education policy, we see clear parallels. As noted in the introduction, in recent years, vocational education has been ascribed an additional objective, which is to be instrumental in the fulfilment of the 95% objective. Thus, at the level of legislation, we see a potential conflict between aims and rationales: retaining and keeping account of students as well as providing the students with vocational skills and competences. As illustrated in the first two cases, this heavily affects the daily VET teaching practice in ways in which the 95% objective and the affiliated retention discourse, on the one hand, and the VET education, on the other hand, seem to have become two independent and distinct disciplines with strong classifications in relation to each other. As a result, the students perceive PE as irrelevant to the education, rather than being part of their carpentry training. We return to this point at the end of the article. Teacher labeling and student positioning

Case three focuses on the actual teaching and the daily interaction between students and teachers in the workshop. The purpose

is to examine how the teachers' perceptions of the students and the subject-relevant content unfold in the practical teaching, and how the students act within the social and professional arena of the workshop.

### Case three

We are in an upholstery workshop. Tom and Peter (students) are sewing edges on different shaped pieces of artificial leather for car seats. They like working in the workshop and enjoy spending time together – they were also together at “auto” before this. Tom describes it “as a regular workplace. People get on with their own work.” Tom says he does not have the energy to come to school every day. He suffers from a bad back and sometimes he has to stay at home.

After half a day's work, Tom is halfway through sewing, but is unsure how to put the pieces together and how to proceed in general. Tom spends hours in the workshop without making any progress before he realizes, in the late afternoon, what to do. The two students and the teacher were not communicating except during one incident when they made a few jokes. The teacher is busy assessing prior learning and helping the students who actively ask for help.

Mikala is one of those students. She is working at the other end of the workshop. Mikala often finds it difficult to proceed and asks the teacher for help many times. The teacher shows her what to do. She asks more questions. He helps her and moves on to other students. Mikala works and texts on her phone a little in between.

“Can you remember everything he says?” I ask.

Mikala (hereafter M) looks despairingly at me: “No, but then I ask again. I might be a bit slow, but that's how it is. And then he comes and shows me how to do it.”

Noemi Katznelson (NK): “How do you feel about asking all the time?”

M: "It's okay. Before I wasn't that comfortable doing it, but it has gotten better now."

NK: "What's it like having to wait?"

M: "Annoying."

NK: "Do you have to wait a lot?"

M: "Yes, I spend a lot of time waiting. As much time as I spend working. Otherwise I can't move on."

NK: "How does that feel?"

M: "It's boring. And then it's a bit fast when he explains something. I don't understand it until he shows me. I just keep asking until I understand it – that's life."

According to the teacher, Tom, Peter and Mikala are weak and unmotivated students with little chance of completing the education. Tom and Peter have a negative influence on each other with high absenteeism, while Mikala is too unstable; she is easily put off and when that happens she is quick to go home.

Returning to Tom, I ask him when he will finish his education. He has no idea. Peter comes to his defense: "This summer I think." The boys want an education, but find it difficult to see how it can be completed and how to relate to the future. They just hope for the best, and until then they take classes to have a good time and have something to do, when they feel up to it and have the energy.

Case three illustrates the teachers' perceptions of the students and the students' view of the teaching, as well as the students' aim with the vocational education and how they try to position themselves in a meaningful manner and in a way where they have some agency. The most conspicuous aspect is the teacher's labeling of the three students as unmotivated and weak, and the statement that the two students Tom and Peter have a negative influence on each other. The fact that there is a sense of community amongst these students, which in fact may increase their

sense of motivation, is not part of the teacher's conception. Likewise, it is not part of the teacher's conception that Tom and Peter work seriously on their projects. Before going into detail with this issue, let us first consider why Tom and Peter are labeled as unmotivated and at risk of dropping out.

From the teacher's perspective, the definition of a good VET student seems to be one who can handle a high degree of independence in the learning environment and take responsibility for their own learning (Andersen & Christensen 2002), for instance, by being proactive and asking for help. Thus, while the students "see" a preoccupied teacher, the teacher "sees" unmotivated and students who choose to withdraw from involvement in school and who keep bad company with like-minded peers.

Although being a "good student" is associated with independent and proactive behavior, Mikala, who exhibits some of these qualities, is not seen as a good student. The question is, why? The teacher does not seem to notice her commitment and independence, but notes that she fiddles with her phone, that her participation is unstable, and that she often leaves early. Factors other than independent and proactive behavior thus seem to be included in the teacher's conception of a good and motivated versus a weak and unmotivated VET student. A dominant aspect of the broader societal context into which the interaction between the teacher and the student is embedded is the deep crisis of the vocational labor market. VET is directly oriented towards the area of the labor market which provides apprenticeship positions for the students. As a consequence, approximately 10,000 VET students applied in vain for an internship in 2010, which is an increase of 16% since 2009 (UNI-C). Bearing this aspect of the situation in mind, the teacher's labeling of the various students may also be based on an assessment of how well

she will do in a very competitive labor market, that is, the teacher asks whether they demonstrate attendance stability and professional competences, etc. The broader societal context is thus instrumental in the labeling of motivated but challenged students as weak students. In accordance with this labeling, the type of commitment the three students show cannot be characterized as the right form of commitment suitable for the labor market. In other words, we see a close correlation between labeling good students, labor market possibilities and the career prospects of students. The underlying logic is: the poorer the chances of apprenticeship and positions on the labor market, the more narrow the labeling of a good VET student becomes – and the greater the number of unmotivated and weak students.

Matters look different from the students' perspective. The labor market situation and the issue of finding an apprenticeship influence their motivation and approach to the education so that the pace of and time spent on the education are of no importance to them. A key point in a previous VET study (Katznelson et al. 2011) is that students who have an apprenticeship are very eager to attend classes and make progress. However, if you, like the two students in the workshop scenario, stand at the back of the queue for an apprenticeship with the prospect of yet another basic training course, as they have done twice before, it becomes difficult to see the point of completing the education. From this perspective, the students are acting rationally and with agency by not trying hard to complete their education, and instead they are focusing on having a good time.

Thus, the external, structural conditions – specifically the lack of apprenticeship positions – play a major role in what goes on in the workshop, and as long as the issue of apprenticeship remains unresolved, the education increases the number of students who,

for rational reasons, downplay their motivation to finish the education and their ambitions for the future. As mentioned, the 95% objective is strongly challenged by the significant dropout rate in VET, which is partly due to the fact that many students cannot get an internship. This gives reason to challenge the aim of retaining all VET students and asks: What happens to the VET students when retention becomes storage?

## Overall analysis of the three cases

### Student perception

A recurring theme is the teachers' labeling of students and the fact that it leads to limited opportunities for students. Assuming that the students' identity as skilled students is not fully formed when they embark on their education, but develops and is created together with the expectations, requirements and opportunities they face at the school, it is reasonable to consider the effect of the labeling. The labeling entails a set of rather fixed expectations that does not capture the existing student diversity and makes it harder for the students to recognize and display different forms of motivation, involvement and commitment to learn a vocational discipline.

Rosenthal (2002) has long identified the psychological phenomenon that people's behavior adapts to the expectations of their surroundings as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Bernstein's concept of labeling captures this notion and it is also found in Davies' positioning concept, albeit not as a self-fulfilling prophecy, but rather as recognition that the expectations people meet co-construct their self-image and their perception of their own identity.

The effect of this phenomenon in an education context is convincingly illustrated by Varenne and McDermott in their study of the American educational system (1998).

Their analyses suggest that when new pupils begin schooling, the notion of learning difficulties is a potential, or expectant, category of the discursive and pedagogical preparedness in the school system. It has created a school administrative tool that labels some pupils as having learning difficulties even before their potential has been unfolded and explored: "Failure is a dangerous category, easy to overuse institutionally and terribly unfair to young children who are increasingly subject to classification before their potentials are meaningfully explored" (ibid. p. xiv). The aim here is not to point at and criticize the individual teacher. Based on the above analyses of various dimensions of the basic training course, the aim is to explore the degree to which the labeling of potential dropout students is embedded in the school's institutional rationale and administrative preparedness, and the degree to which this label is applied to students even before their potential has been explored. The issue of success or failure, the issue of dropping out or staying, and the issue of the daily interplay between students and teachers are not (solely) functions of and about the individual VET student, but also a question of the structural terms and conditions these students face within the institution and more broadly in the societal context of VET. This suggests a move away from the individual functionalistic "blaming the victim" perspective towards a critical view of the role of school institutions in promoting or preventing dropping out, as has been the dominant view in international research for the last ten to twenty years (Nielsen 2011).

### **VET between accounting and education**

Lastly, we wish to relate these micro-social analyses to some general and topical tendencies in the Danish education system, that is, the marketization of education. Most education systems in the EU have been increasing-

ly influenced by a market logic and neoliberalism for the last ten to twenty years (Biesta 2010). This is the case in Denmark, and since 1991, all VET schools in Denmark have been legally self-governing institutions with responsibility for their own operation and economy. The schools are, in principle, supposed to be run on the same financial basis as ordinary companies (Koudahl 2011). Since VET schools receive a state grant in the form of a certain amount of money per student per week (a so-called taximeter system (Undervisningsministeriet [The Ministry of Education] 2008), VET can be defined as a business and the VET students as "commodities." Consequently, school managements give much weight to the economic aspect of the daily operation and they aim to get as a high a turnover of the "commodities" as possible. Retention of students is thus not simply a goal for the individual student's education, but is also a business matter pivotal in ensuring the financial foundation of the schools. Such models of neoliberal economic policy have a major impact on daily pedagogical practice at the educational institutions. It is embedded in the school logic as we have seen in the cases, and the management and teachers run the risk of giving priority to performance indicators such as how to reach 95%, rather than focusing on ensuring quality in the education. The dominant question regarding education thus becomes about what works in order to increase the percentage of educated youths to 95% rather than what the education should be about.

The three cases discussed in this article exemplify exactly this point of how initiatives that stem from the retention discourse in practice clash with the students' expectations and attitudes. Moreover, in practice, the retention discourse and the education discourse seem to make a double claim on the teachers, which is difficult to cope with

at times, and complicates their efforts to build good and trusting relationships with the students.

## Concluding remarks

Neither the teachers nor the students' work – or the work of the school management for that matter – can be discussed or understood in isolation from the terms and conditions of the schools. Our analyses suggest that the policy framing of the vocational education as serving a twofold purpose has spread through the institutions into the teachers' practice and mindset, so that the 95% objective and the retention discourse have manifested themselves as two distinct disciplines with strong classification in relation to each other.

It is not our intention to argue against initiatives such as PE. To strengthen the body, muscles and locomotor system, and to acquire healthy lifting techniques as well as developing good social relations with peers could very well be part of preparing for a career as a carpenter. However, as the analysis illustrates, when PE is classified as belonging to the retention discipline, it creates a school practice and a way of organizing such activities that detach it from the vocational discipline, and leads to loss of motivation and commitment among the students, and thereby unintended push-out effects.

Retention initiatives may be helpful and important to VET students depending on the underlying mindset and their implementation in the overall course of education. However, they must make sense in relation to the teachers' time and role and, perhaps most importantly, in relation to the students' perceptions and expectations of the education. If they remain budding ideas detached from the actual education and the students' overall learning and development plan, they attract the teachers' attention and steal time

from the basic service, which is to teach. Such initiatives may even promote the students' weakness and create student opposition towards the school.

These aspects can be identified in the VET school material and in the teachers' expectations of VET students. The students faced it when they embarked on their education and it established a certain tone in the communication between teachers and students, which made it hard for the students to be recognized for their commitment and motivation. The lack of recognition may in itself produce feelings of discontent on the part of the students and result in disengaged and demotivated students. A move away from an individualistic perspective to a critical contextual perspective on the role of the institution in promoting motivated students and preventing push-out effects is thus suggested. This also points to the important issue of professional identity. The VET students are not only about to learn a craft – learning how to do. They are also in the process of developing a professional identity – learning who to be. Thus, when the student, as shown in case one, asks about the correct color of work clothes there is much more at play than the simple question of clothing. The student is looking to the teacher for guidance with regards to a professional identity, and this ongoing process of students developing their professional identity is important for the teachers and the school to recognize and support. Another important factor is the lack of internships, which scares some students away from thinking about their future prospects and makes them focus only on finishing school. Thus, the societal conditions of the education contribute to the increase in the number of students who will be seen as unmotivated from the teachers' perspective.

As mentioned in the opening, it appears that VET teachers are having difficulties per-

forming the double task they have been given. The price seems to be that the teachers are losing sight of the pedagogical content at the expense of keeping count of the students and managing various retention efforts initiated by the school. To some extent, VET as a teaching profession has lost ground to VET as a retention profession. To overcome this challenge, it may be an idea for the schools to shift their focus to what they really want the students to learn. Based on the analyses presented in this article, we suggest making a greater effort to bridge the gap between the students and the teachers. This would include thorough consideration of the elements and progression of a vocational education seen from the students' perspective. Moreover, the education must take account of the students' opportunities for displaying their motivation and commitment within the societal and institutional framework for pedagogical interaction at vocational schools.

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